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Reflections on Swami Vivekananda's Speeches

At the World Parliament of Religions, 1893

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MUCH HAS BEEN written about Swami Vivekananda's appearance at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893. On the whole, the assessments of his appearance from both academics and non-academics has been positive, emphasising Vivekananda's contributions to religious harmony in the world. Vivekananda was and remains an exemplary spokesperson for the enduring themes of the Ramakrishna mission, in particular for the idea that all religions are true inasmuch as they lead to the same goal. In a previous analysis of the Mission I have written:

The centrepiece for the approach to religious pluralism is the statement, 'many paths, one goal', which is frequently translated into the assertion that all religions are true, and, the so-called scientific religious experiments of Ramakrishna (1836-1888) which supposedly justify this statement. This is so from the sayings of Ramakrishna as recorded in the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna down through the writings of the Swamis to the present day.¹

Most analyses of Vivekananda and the Mission tend to take such stock phrases or assertions of harmony or sameness at face value. The result too frequently is an uncritical acceptance of the Mission's assertions about issues such as religious pluralism or harmony which in turn leads to an inadequate understanding of the views of the Mission. It might be instructive in this centennial of

Vivekananda's visit to the Chicago parliament to see what light his statements might shed on issues of religious harmony or pluralism.

Vivekananda addressed the Assembly on six different occasions in 1893, the response to the welcome on September 11, 'Why We Disagree' on September 13, the paper on Hinduism on September 19, 'Religion Not the Crying Need of India' on September 20, 'Buddhism, the Fulfillment of Hinduism' on September 26, and the address at the final session on September 27. The major presentation is, of course, the paper on Hinduism presented on September 19. This, therefore will be the focus for this reflection.

Much of the speech on Hinduism is taken up with explaining the major teachings of the Vedas, which Vivekananda sees as revelation, but not revelation in the sense of a book; rather revelation as 'the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times.'² The gist of this revelation is caught in four major points: creation is without beginning or end, the human being is not body, but an eternal spirit, this spirit is subject to multiple births and deaths in its quest for perfection, and that perfection, *mukti*, means freedom from the bonds of imperfection, death, and misery.³ The essence of Hinduism is summarised by Vivekananda as follows:

The Hindu religion does not consist in struggles and attempts to believe a cer-

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tain doctrine or dogma, but in realising – not in believing, but in being and becoming.

Thus the whole object of their system is by constant struggle to become perfect, to become divine, to reach God and see God, and this reaching God, seeing God, becoming perfect even as the Father in Heaven is perfect, constitutes the religion of the Hindus.⁴

This summary and statement of essence is hardly surprising any more. It has become standard fare in introductory texts on Hinduism. Important for our purposes is the frame in which this summary is set, that is what Vivekananda has to say both before and after his summary of the Vedas. The frame is made up of a number of important points or assertions about the place of Hinduism within the context of the world religions.

At the outset of his talk Vivekananda claims that Hinduism provides an umbrella large enough to encompass all of the so-called indigenous traditions of India.

... sect after sect arose in India and seemed to shake the religion of the Vedas to its very foundations, but like the waters of the seashore in a tremendous earthquake it receded only for a while, only to return in an all absorbing flood, a thousand times more vigorous, and when the tumult of the rush was over, these sects were all sucked in, absorbed, and assimilated into the immense body of the mother faith.⁵

In the context of this image of the umbrella, Vivekananda sets up a hierarchy of indigenous faiths with the 'high spiritual flights of the Vedanta philosophy' at the top, and the 'agnosticism of the Buddhists', the 'atheism of the Jains', and the 'low ideas of idolatry' ranged underneath in descending order.⁶ This is the vision which Vivekananda will apply to the relationship of Hinduism to the world religions. The Hindu religion is the superior religion because it 'does not consist in struggles and attempts to believe a certain

doctrine or dogma ... but in being and becoming.⁷

Furthermore:

To the Hindu, man is not travelling from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lower to higher truth. To him all the religions, from the lowest fetishism to the highest absolutism, mean so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realise the Infinite, each determined by the conditions of its birth and association, and each of these marks a stage of progress...⁸

These assertions and images surface in the other shorter speeches of Vivekananda before the world parliament of religions, and are repeated often in his other writings and speeches, and the writings and speeches of the swamis coming after him.

Does this vision of Vivekananda's hold promise for the peaceful interaction and co-existence of religious traditions in the modern era? Wilhelm Halbfass, in his work *India and Europe*, makes the point that nineteenth century re-interpreters of Hinduism such as Vivekananda expanded the traditional concept of 'many paths, one goal' to make a place for the many faiths of the world under the umbrella of Hinduism. In the classical world the image of many paths leading to the same goal had been applied within the context of the *darsanas* or Vedic traditions. In the modern world Hindu thinkers used it to include non-Vedic traditions within the world of Hinduism.⁹ Vivekananda's view then could be seen as a progressive one for his day, aimed at eliminating the conflict that so often accompanies the interaction between traditions. This is surely what Vivekananda had in mind in his many critical references to the tendency of traditions to force fixed dogmas or doctrines on people and societies. It might even be seen as progressive today in the face of the apparent resurgence of various forms of religious fundamentalism which tend to paint opposing viewpoints as evil and false.

There are however, limitations in Vivekananda's vision. As some of the quotations contained in this paper indicate, Vivekananda's vision of religious traditions is a hierarchical one with Hinduism sitting on top of the heap. Furthermore, his definition of essential Hinduism is Advaita Vedanta. From his perspective Advaita is the common religion of all sects of India¹⁰, and that to which all religions point. We have here, in effect, the language of fulfillment which was being used by some Christian missionaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Here, of course, Hinduism or Advaita, not Christianity is the fulfillment of the traditions of the world.

It is this hierarchical vision which informs Vivekananda's view that all religions are true. This may be a palatable vision to those who see the truth of all religions in the mystical experience of a unity of some sort. It may also be palatable to those who believe that harmony among religions is not possible unless one assumes that all religions are, in essence, the same. Otherwise we are condemned to a world of religious strife. This is what Vivekananda seems to have had in mind in his September 15 address, 'Why We Disagree'. He states:

I am a Hindu. I am sitting in my own little well and thinking that the whole world is my little well. The Christian sits in his little well and thinks the whole world is his well. The Mohammedan sits in his little well and thinks that is the whole world.¹¹

But, is agreement a necessary condition for religious harmony? I think not. The challenge is not to create unity out of diversity as Vivekananda seems to think, but to live in harmony in spite of disagreements, some of which may be rather fundamental. This will require an attitude of openness, of seeing the other as significant in the exchange of ideas and argumentation over ideas. This may achieve the breaking down of barriers as Vivekananda wanted, but may not lead to his assumption that all religions are in essence the same in that they all point to the same goal.

Notes

- 1 See R.N. Neufeldt, 'The Response of the Ramakrishna Mission', in H. G. Coward (ed.), *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987, p. 66.
- 2 *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Mayavati Edition, Volume 1, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1970, pp 6-7. hereafter referred to as *CW*.
- 3 See *CW*, Volume 1, pp. 7-13.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 9 See particularly chapters 18 and 22 in Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988.
- 10 *CW*, Volume 1, p. 13.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 5.